

# Book Review of Zachary Crispin. (2017). *The Fundamentals of Students' Unionism*. Castlegar, Canada: Selkirk College Students' Union.

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## Introduction

*The Fundamentals of Students' Unionism* projects Selkirk College Students' Union Executive Director and former British Columbia Federation of Students Chairperson Zachary Crispin's knowledge and experience of Canadian postsecondary students' unions into both an empirical assessment of Canadian students' union structures and an ideal way that student leaders should conduct operations within said unions. The mere existence of work on such a topic (let alone an overview of how students' unions work and should best be structured) is incredibly rare in education scholarship, with the closest comparison being perhaps Nigel Moses' more historical study of Canadian student activism that tracks students' unions from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s (Moses, 2001). Publishing such a foundational work that goes beyond historical analysis has the potential to forge definitions of key terms and cement values that can shape future works on the topic. However, this mantle also comes with great responsibility, as even seemingly minor biases, misconceptions, omissions, and theory-related shortcomings can have large echoes as lasting detriments that steer both research and (as this is also meant to be a manual for Canadian student leaders) Canadian student politics itself in dangerous directions. While Crispin's empirical accounts are helpful in understanding contemporary students' union structures, the book's normative aspects encourage authoritarian practices involving media relations and exclusion of dissenting opinions, differing ideologies, and rival student organizations from student politics discourse. *The Fundamentals of Students' Unionism* must therefore be studied carefully if cited by future scholars so as not to avoid necessary critique.

The book attempts to justify its arguments that its recommended political methods are most efficient in attaining students' unions' ultimate goal, which for Crispin consists not only of free education but of the student movement serving as part of a larger workers' movement to overthrow capitalist structures in society. The arguments are presented from Crispin's self-proclaimed socialist perspective, defined as "[s]elf-determination for all nations [including Indigenous peoples and other groups identifying as distinct entities] in Canada, robust and diffuse democracy, radical action to fight climate change, and utterly universal education – maintained through a society free of class exploitation" (p. 7). Moreover, Crispin's assertion that students' power is determined by their labour (pp. 7-9) is reflective of the Marxist concept of labour-power where one's power is determined by what their labour produces (Marx & Engels, 1904, pp. 2-8). In addition, the book takes a clear stance on the partisan nature of the divided Canadian student movement by ardently supporting the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), while staunchly condemning rival students' unions like the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA), a sentiment likely influenced by Crispin's involvement in the British Columbia Federation of Students, a provincial wing of the CFS.

The book's 12 chapters can be divided into two sections. The first section suggests how students should organize themselves politically on a postsecondary campus. The first and second chapters outline campaign planning and tactics (p. 17), integrating George T. Doran's concept of S.M.A.R.T. goals, which involves ensuring that goals are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (Doran, 1981, pp. 35-36). The third and fourth chapters detail strategies for interacting with decision-makers, external organizations, and media. The fourth chapter's recommended media outreach procedures are troubling because they involve repeating key messages to avoid answering difficult questions. This position can be harmful to students' union operations since it calls for lying by omission, limiting opportunities for dialogue, and viewing journalists as adversaries who act "in the pursuit of compelling quotes, or through malice" (pp. 44-45). Holding the press in contempt and repeating official messages to avoid further questions are far from progressive praxes, but rather liken to tactics of authoritarian regimes and, in recent political discourse south of the border, attempts to vilify the press as an "enemy of the people" (Graham-Harrison, 2018). Chapters five through seven are among the book's most valuable contributions to the study of higher education, as they include ways to plan events, develop volunteers, and establish coalitions of campus organizations and external bodies, drawing from Crispin's unique personal experience as a student politics insider.

These ideas and best practices of Canadian students' union activism from the perspective of a student leader who was a direct participant in students' union activities are incredibly significant because such a view is largely absent from existing education literature.

The book's second section overviews the Canadian students' union system, including common structures and how students' unions fit within provincial and federal law. The eighth chapter covers students' union elections, with advice on building election platforms and campaign teams. The ninth chapter on students' union democracy merely explains running effective meetings with Robert's Rules of Order. The tenth chapter comprises various legal aspects of students' unions, including British Columbia case studies, to explain how concepts such as the right to organize, fiduciary duties, conflicts of interest, and the unionization of students' union staff are applied in similar ways as in other non-profit corporations. Crispin identifies membership fee collection as unique since each students' union relies on their postsecondary institution's administration to collect annual membership fees from students and transfer the funds to the union (pp. 10-11). Crispin also notes students' union finances as being distinctly democratic, since membership dues "are usually set by referendum of the entire membership" (p. 102), vital information for anyone studying students' unions, as other non-profit corporations do not operate in such a way (pp. 102-103). It also provides brief explanations of relevant financial concepts, stressing the need for elected student representatives to maintain fiscal transparency and accountability (p. 11). The twelfth chapter outlines how students' unions can advocate on behalf of students in grievance processes relating to academic affairs, discrimination, and other instances of unfair treatment. While having to remain general to account for differences among Canadian postsecondary institutions, this description offers insights beneficial to student leaders, including how to negotiate with faculty and administrators, participate in appeal processes, and present policy proposals. Crispin maintains that student advocates should "help students win appeals" as opposed to "ensuring fairness," because the latter "leaves students themselves to win the appeal" (p. 117).

The conclusion and following appendix on the history of pan-Canadian student organizations reveal Crispin's normative vision for the student movement and his partiality towards the CFS. Crispin asserts that a larger proportion of students needs to become involved in student advocacy and overcome differences for the quality of education to be improved (as opposed to just a small group of student leaders) and reiterates the idea that students should see themselves as part of the workers' movement (pp. 124-125). Crispin has nothing but praise for the CFS, not mentioning any of its flaws including numerous allegations of corruption and authoritarian practices presented in Titus Gregory's *Solidarity for Their Own Good: Self-determination and the Canadian Federation of Students*, including assertions that the CFS is controlled more by permanent, unelected staff members intervening behind the scenes than by elected student representatives (Gregory, 2010). Crispin also makes no mention of student leaders' and journalists' coverage of the revelation of a hidden CFS bank account with \$263,052.80 in unauthorized deposits and \$262,776.13 in unauthorized withdrawals from July 2010 to September 2014 (Gregory, 2010, pp. 52-137; Kao, 2017). Despite calling for "robust and diffuse democracy" (Kao, 2017, p. 7), Crispin only focuses on the CFS' advocacy strengths and ignores its organizational failings that contradict his vision for students' unions.

Moreover, Crispin only criticizes the other national students' union in Canada, CASA (Crispin, 2017, p. 129), with no mention of its positive contributions to education policy development through negotiation with national and provincial governmental actors (Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, n.d.). One attempted critique of the less advocacy-oriented and more policy-focused CASA is a claim that its "membership declined over the 2010s" (Crispin, 2017, p. 129), yet Crispin mentions later (p. 129-130) that all CFS-affiliated students' unions from Quebec left the CFS between 2013 and 2015, excluding the fact that this was done because Quebec students' unions were concerned the CFS was undemocratic (Cox, 2013; Gregory, 2010, pp. 91-92; Monroy, 2013). This suggests that both national students' unions have experienced recent decreases in membership rather than just CASA losing members because of organizational shortcomings. Ignoring fundamental texts and historical events that provide counterarguments not only weakens the quality of Crispin's scholarship, but in terms of the book as a manual for student leaders, avoiding potential criticisms of the CFS limits student leaders' potential to discern for themselves which provincial and/or national students' union best represents their interests. It also hampers student leaders' potential to determine which aspects from students' unions in other parts of the country have best practices that they can learn from and apply elsewhere.

Furthermore, Crispin's (2017) critique of liberalism throughout the book is lackluster, reducing the term to a narrow definition of "the constant supremacy of the individual over the collective" (p. 61) and "[s]elf-interested politicking with no regard for benefits to others" (p. 9), an argument which seems to be built off of a quote from

Vladimir Lenin cited in the introduction that describes liberal reformers as merely trying to prove their loyalty to a capitalist system (pp. 8-9). While critiquing liberalism would be not only permissible, but encouraged under normal circumstances, it is important to understand that Crispin's idea of liberalism as selfishness is not just his critique of the concept, but also his definition, which limits his criticism to merely saying that liberalism is bad without explaining why. This problem is exacerbated when Crispin goes as far as to assert that liberalism should be combatted and rooted out of student politics (p. 124), as well as that students who support such ideals have "no place in the movement" (p. 74). In other words, student leaders reading the book as a manual who may not know what liberalism is would only see it as bad and that everyone who believes in aspects of it should be excluded from political participation. This is largely because to refer to the student movement is to refer to something larger than students' unions, encompassing other types of student organizations within and outside of education systems united in a single, yet multi-faceted, social movement. Crispin's take on students' unionism thus seems to be that only socialist students should lead or participate in students' unions, which creates a paradox given the conclusion's call for more students to get involved. It also indirectly promotes the restriction of political discourse by refusing to engage with other ideologies through debate and logical refutation in a students' union context.

The book's underlying message of avoiding political plurality, ideological debate, or dissent from CFS dogma, plus viewing the press as an enemy and prioritizing winning appeals over ensuring fairness, would not lead to progressive students' unions as Crispin envisions, but rather such authoritarian means would render the goal unreachable. These shortcomings spoil the great potential of personal knowledge and case studies of a scarcely-researched topic in Canadian higher education, leaving the book pedagogically insufficient for student leaders and principally useful for researchers who understand its limitations.

As an education researcher and student activist who has worked with students from various backgrounds against authoritarianism in education systems, I cannot help but view students' unions as inescapable political pluralities since membership is often mandatory, and I believe that the student movement is strongest when different groups can find common ground and form coalitions to enact change, constantly critiquing their own praxes to best emulate the ideals they want to instill in society.

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